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ABSTRACT

Each culture has its own nonverbal as well as its verbal language. Movements, gestures and sounds have distinct and often conflicting interpretations in different countries. For Americans communicating with Japanese, misunderstandings are of two types: Japanese behavior which is completely new to the American, and Japanese behavior which is similar or identical to American behavior, but which carries a different meaning. An American constantly uses eyes, eyebrows and forehead to express his feelings during conversation. Japanese are taught not to show their emotions in this way, so Americans think of them as uninterested or untruthful. Americans smile with their mouths and eyes during friendly conversation; Japanese widen their mouths to form certain vowels and this may seem like an insincere smile. When an American nods his head, it signifies agreement; for Japanese, it merely means attentiveness. Japanese bow politely; Americans may interpret this an insincere fawning. Japanese hand gestures may also be misunderstood by Americans. As for seated posture, an American may sit in a casual, relaxed position and interpret the stiff, polite Japanese pose as unfriendly. Similarly, proximity, odors, environmental temperatures and the uniform colors of Japanese clothing will puzzle or put off Americans. International relations require an examination and understanding of such cultural nonverbal communication. (CHK)

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AMERICANS AND JAPANESE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

When people of the same culture and language communicate, information is transmitted from one to the other by more than just the words used. Information is also carried by the ways these words are spoken, by the hand gestures, by the changes in facial expressions, and by the body postures of both the speaker and his hearers. In addition, a great deal of information about a person is communicated by his clothing and his general grooming. Observers and listeners from the same culture and language as the speaker not only understand the words being spoken, but also constantly "read" the language of the body of the speaker.

When communication is attempted between people from different cultures, they will generally speak whatever language both of them understand--the same verbal language. However, only rarely do they ever use the same nonverbal language--the same body language. Each unconsciously uses his native body language and also interprets the body language of his listener as if it were that of someone from his own culture. The result is often mis-communication.

Whether speaking their own language or speaking a learned

foreign language, everybody unconsciously sends cultural signals through nonverbal channels, yet most people are totally unaware of just what nonverbal signals they are sending. Furthermore, each of us also unconsciously reacts to the non-verbal signals of all others around us. It is not sufficient for us to be in control of our spoken language; we need to be in control of our unspoken language as well. The first step toward this control is the development of an awareness of what nonverbal messages we are sending; the next step is to learn to understand the way we react to the nonverbal messages we are receiving. Only after that can we begin to control our nonverbal behavior and begin to understand that of others. If while studying a foreign language we learn only the skills of sending and receiving written and spoken words (the "four skills" of speaking, hearing, reading, and writing the foreign language) and do not learn nonverbal communication skills, we cannot avoid misunderstandings in our cross-cultural/cross-language communication; communication is both verbal and nonverbal.

In <u>written</u> communication, whether within one culture or across cultures, nonverbal communication would seem to be of little importance; yet something about the author and the importance of what he has written are communicated through the quality of the paper, the binding of the book, the size of the envelope, the style of the handwriting, or the accuracy of the typing. Of even greater importance in <u>oral</u> communication across cultures is the foreign

body language which accompanies the speaking and hearing of the foreign spoken language. This body language communicates information between the speaker and the hearer through the motions and positions of their bodies.

In the broadest sense, then, nonverbal communication is made up of all the ways in which people communicate information that is not actually contained in the meanings of the words and grammatical structures they use. These ways have been analyzed into six categories, or "nonverbal communication modalities," by Duncan[2]: kinesic behavior, paralanguage, proxemics, olfaction, skin sensitivity, and the use of artefacts. In my on-going research into Japanese nonverbal communication, I have further subdivided Duncan's six modalities, and have especially been investigating his first modality, kinesic behavior.

My investigative techniques have included many hours of watching and re-watching videotapes of Japanese college students and other adults of varying ages and backgrounds as they converse. During the fall of 1973 this intensive study was supplemented by additional hours of observing Japanese people communicating in just about every possible place in Japan--in trains, buses, elevators, coffee shops, restaurants, shops, department stores, parks, private homes, hotels, <u>ofuro</u> (public baths), receptions, theaters, classrooms, and so on. To this

has been added over 300 hours of watching Japanese commercial TV, primarily family-type dramas, sports, and interview shows. Furthermore, to check the validity of some of my conclusions, I have manoeuvered Japanese friends into certain interaction situations to check their automatic nonverbal reactions.

Any specific bit of Japanese nonverbal communication is a potential point of misunderstanding for Americans. Basically, these misunderstandings are the results of two types of Japanese behavior:

(1) First, Japanese behavior which is completely new to the American--he doesn't know how to interpret what he sees, feels, or smells, because he has had no previous experience with such behavior.

(2) Second, Japanese behavior which is either identical to or similar to some American behavior, but which has a different, specifically Japanese-culture based meaning. These items of behavior probably cause more problems for the American than do those in the first group; this is because the American instinctively interprets these behavior items in terms of his American culture and immediately reacts to them in his native American ways. Only by conscious effort and much mental training can he discipline himself to stifle both his initial American interpretation and reaction long enough to see the behavior in its complete Japanese cultural context.

It is from this second group of items of Japanese behavior that I have taken many of my examples in the present discussion. It should be clearly understood that neither the Japanese whose behavior is misunderstood nor the American who misunderstands this behavior is "wrong." Each is acting and reacting in accordance with what he has learned from his own culture. In addition, it will be obvious that the reactions that are predicted here for the "average American" are so generalized that in some instances only the most unsophisticated American may react in this way; however, from my observations of American tourists and businessmen in Japan, such unsophisticated Americans far outnumber the sufficiently sophisticated ones.

II. VALIDITY OF THIS STUDY

Much of what has been observed and reported here may not be what modern, well-educated Japanese people practice (because of "proper" home or school training); however, the behavior bits being commented on have occurred frequently enough for me, an American, to notice it as something unusual, something not American. Whether or not all Japanese, or even whether well-mannered Japanese do or should behave in these ways is not the primary point of this paper. The making of value judgments regarding the propriety in Japan of these behavior patterns is perhaps the responsibility of Japanese moral educators. What <u>is</u> important for

American-Japanese cross-cultural communication is how an American interprets the nonverbal communication going on when he converses with a Japanese. Whether his conversation is entirely in English, whether in Japanese and English through an interpreter, or whether entirely in Japanese, only the rarest American (or any other non-Japanese foreigner) is sufficiently "Japanized" to react to the non-verbal communication of the Japanese as a Japanese person does.

III. POTENTIALLY MISUNDERSTOOD JAPANESE BODY LANGUAGE

A. Eyes, eyebrows, and forehead

An American instinctively looks at the forehead and eyes of the person he talks with in order to get clues about his listener's opinions and attitudes. He notices that many Japanese, both men and women, flutter their eyelids as they converse. In an American cultural setting this eye-fluttering occurs when some persons are uncertain; if the Japanese is a man, some Americans may interpret the eyelid fluttering as a sign of homosexual effeminacy. The American must learn that in Japan eyelid fluttering by either men or women often indicates conscious subordination or respect--and nothing more.

An American's forehead and eyebrows are constantly in motion as he speaks and these motions regularly express the inner feelings behind the words he is saying. The "blank," nearly motionless Japanese forehead reveals very little of the Japanese person's inner feelings; therefore, the American, who is of course looking for feedback, feels

that the Japanese is not really interested in his conversation or (worse yet) that the Japanese is hiding the truth and responding with lies. This impression of "the lying Japanese" is reinforced when the American, who expects considerable eye contact when conversing, notices the Japanese constantly breaking his eye contact as soon as it is made--the Japanese quickly looks down or off into the distance. To an American, this is an indicator of either a lack of interest or a lack of truthfulness. In Japan, however, parents train each child not to burden other people with his problems by letting his feelings show in his face. He is also taught to avert his eyes to show respect. The American thinks he sees familiar body language but completely misses the respect and agreeableness the Japanese is trying to convey.

B. Mouths and smiles

Americans show agreement or at least friendliness whenever they smile. All Japanese seem to be smiling when they talk--but their smiles only partially resemble American enjoyment smiles.

The Japanese language has no rounded vowels, such as the /uw/ of "new" or the /aw/ of "now" in English. Instead, in Japanese both /nu/ and /no/ (and all other Japanese sounds) are pronounced with the lips spread. It is this mouth position that appears to be a slight "Mona Lisa" smile to Americans. If they do notice a difference, it is that the Japanese eyes do not

join the mouth in these smiles; the outer corners of the Japanese eyes remain unwrinkled. To an American, a friendly smile must include not only the upturned corners of the mouth but also the wrinkling of the outer corners of the eyes. If he notices that only the mouth is involved, he may "recognize" it as an American sarcastic or insincere grimace--and return to America saying that Japanese have "pasted-on", insincere smiles. Actually, often what an American interprets as a smile (and therefore as either agreement or sarcasm) is not meant to be a smile by the Japanese; they are just speaking their language with the spread lips required for correct pronunciation.

This matter of smiles illustrates one very important point in nonverbal communication: Generally, no single bit of behavior--no single gesture or facial expression by itself can safely be interpreted alone. The American gets an overall impression from all of the body language he senses, and then draws his unconscious conclusions from this totality of what he has seen. When he sees something familiar co-occurring with something either unfamiliar or incongruous, he will either unconsciously disregard or overlook the incongruous and the unknown, or else he will judge the person to be "strange" or "queer" (this sort of reaction to the unexpected is, of course, found in all cultures).

C. Head

Whenever an American sees anyone's head nod up and down, even slightly, he interprets that to mean mental assent. The Japanese nodding of the head while listening (to indicate that he is paying attention) leads the American to believe that the Japanese is showing

agreement with whatever is being discussed. Furthermore, "silence means consent" in an American discussion situation; therefore, the American expects to be interrupted by any disagreeing listener. Yet, to a Japanese, interrupting someone before he is finished speaking, especially to disagree, is the height of impropriety. Many times an American has discussed a situation and thought his Japanese listeners were in complete agreement, only to be told after he has finished that no one else agrees with him. It is unbelievably rude to an American for a listener to <u>appear</u> to agree when he actually disagrees. The American must learn, however, that Japanese will find it nearly impossible to interrupt him while he is speaking, and that they will nod their heads up and down as he speaks to show their attentiveness. The Japanese, of course, <u>do</u> show disagreement while listening, but a non-Japanese will not be able to pick up these disagreement signals without considerable training.

D. <u>Shoulders</u> and <u>torso</u>

To an American, the strangest bit of Japanese body language is the bow. Americans do not bow either when standing or sitting. In fact, they rarely ever even see anyone bow except for the doorman at very elegant restaurants or European royalty on TV. To the majority of Americans, bowing indicates extreme subservience, a non-democratic indignity left over from European colonialism. Therefore, the American does not know how to react when a Japanese

bows to him.

He may initially interpret the bowing of store clerks and service people as some sort of exaggerated, insincere attempt to curry his favor, as of a hungry dog wagging its tail for a bit of food. Of course, most Americans in Japan soon learn not to react negatively to every bow they see, but it is the rare one who can appreciate the genuine affection and respect implied by the bows he receives from his Japanese friends.

Because most Americans do not completely understand the true significance of the bows they receive, they do not know exactly how to respond, and are often embarrassed. For this and other reasons, the American will attempt to hurry through the formalities of Japanese greetings and introductions and "get down to business"--and in his pushiness destroy what little rapport was being built up through the bowing, tea drinking, and exchanging of pleasantries that is socially demanded as the starting point whenever Japanese meet.

E. Hands

When passing an item at a meal, the Japanese will set a dish, the sugar bowl, or the bottle of soy sauce down on the table between him and an American sitting beside him, rather than pass it directly to the American. He does this to avoid giving the impression that he is trying to put the American under obligation to thank him for doing him a favor. The American, instead, associates the passing of

items from hand to hand as a sign of friendliness and interprets this lack of personal contact as Japanese aloofness. If an American receives something, especially a gift, with two hands, he implies in America that he is greedily grabbing the gift from the giver; therefore, the American normally receives a gift with just one hand while he looks the giver in the eyes and says a sincere "Thank you", and possibly shakes the giver's hand. A Japanese gift recipient receives the item with two hands, with downcast eyes, and with a low bow--all this is completely different from the reaction the American has expected. Therefore, the gift-giving American, even though he may have heard the proper English words, "Thank you very much," may feel that he has not been properly thanked, nonverbally.

Although Americans do not "talk with their hands" as much as the French and the Italians do, certain hand gestures are extremely important in the nonverbal communication which accompanies American speech. For our purposes, American hand gestures can be roughly divided into two types: (1) the more-or-less conscious ones which reinforce or interpret the meaning of the words being spoken, and (2) those which are unconscious but which reveal something about the inner feelings of the speaker (whether he is nervous, relaxed, antagonistic, defensive, etc.).

Japanese tend to use a variety of head jerks, semi-bows,

and other head motions rather than hand motions to reinforce what they are saying. The American unconsciously expects the Japanese to be using American hand gestures, and he feels that Japanese speak English "without any feeling." However, when Japanese do use hand gestures, they are not always understood by Americans. For example, when a Japanese politely points toward another person (or occasionally toward a place or thing), he uses a flat hand, palm up.. To an American, the open palm, especially when accompanied by a bow, is the gesture used by beggars asking for money--and beggars are generally despised in America. Therefore, when a Japanese hotel employee points toward the elevator (doozo, kochira s, "please go this way") the American may think he is being asked for a tip even before the employee will show him to his room. Again, the well-known Japanese beckoning gesture is consistently misunderstood by American tourists. The Japanese tour guide raises her arm to head level or above, her palm down, and flutters her fingers toward her palm--and her American charges merrily wave back and walk farther away.

Americans generally cross their hands slightly when they applaud at musical or sports performances. Many Japanese, however, clap their hands with their fingers spread apart and the tips of their fingers pointing up. This is the "pat-a-cake" nursery rhyme clapping position taught to babies in America. An American onlooker may think that a Japanese adult who applauds this way is

childish. He needs to realize that the Japanese are not showing their degree of approval by the loudness of their clapping; their light "pat-a-cake" clap takes less arm movement in crowded theaters, still shows the necessary approval, and doesn't draw undue attention to the person applauding.

F. Seated posture

Americans unconsciously "read" another American's mental attitude from the way he sits or stands. Years of research and numerous books on this aspect of American culture have given us good insight into this area of non-verbal communication. So far this field seems to be almost unexplored for Japan.

To an American, a person who has nothing to hide, who can be trusted, and who is in agreement with what is being said--or at least he is willing to be reasoned with--will look relaxed. On the other hand, a tense person will be suspected of hiding something or of being antagonistic toward either the person speaking or the topic being discussed.

The average Japanese almost never gives an American the impression that he is relaxed. His posture is too stiff, and so the American unconsciously believes that the Japanese he is talking with is either antagonistic or dishonestly hiding something. A relaxed, sitting posture for an American can involve leaning back in his chair, crossing his legs, and possibly clasping

his hands behind his head with his elbows outspread. (Research has shown what certain variations of these positions indicate to an American, but that is not part of this present discussion.) No "proper" Japanese, unless he is nearly drunk, will assume this "I'm your (Japanese) boss" position when he is relaxed.

In fact, respectful interest is shown in Japan more often by an erect-from-the-hips posture, feet flat on the floor, hands in the lap. But to an American, this Japanese posture indicates tenseness, indifference, disagreement, or antagonism. When along with this posture the American notices the general Japanese lack of eye contact, he may feel he is getting nowhere in his discussion and may become angry or frustrated. The slight, fixed Japanese smile and the perhaps faint head nods will be interpreted in this situation by the American as either supercilious disagreement or even absolute antagonism. Although the Japanese may be trying to show by his nonverbal communication that he is interested and wants to cooperate, the American may misunderstand all of this nonverbal communication and break off the discussion in disgust. Even though everyone may have understood the words being used, no true communication of ideas occurred because the Japanese was unconscious of what nonverbal signals he was sending and the American was mis-reading all of them within an American context.

G. Standing, walking posture

Many of the problems that exist when a Japanese and an American are seated while talking occur when they are standing. The American again is looking for relaxed friendliness, while the Japanese is politely but stiffly standing without moving a muscle. The American interprets this as tenseness and unfriendliness. Furthermore, perhaps when the American saw the Japanese man come across the room toward him, he immediately noticed the way he walked. If the Japanese scuffed along (as when wearing zoori sandals or slippers), the American may have been reminded of the way Charlie Chaplin's hobo walked or an American drunk walks. If, however, the Japanese walked with the brisk, short steps of the Tokyo Japanese white-collar worker ("salaryman"), the American may be reminded of the effeminate walk of an American homosexual. If the Japanese walked toward the American with politely downcast eyes and a slight smile, this effeminacy would be emphasized in the American's mind. Somehow the American needs to learn that in Japan these movements do not in any sense indicate either sloppiness or effeminacy.

IV. OTHER TYPES OF MISUNDERSTOOD NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION[3]

A. Paralanguage (manner of speaking)

Paralanguage includes the types of sounds that occur during speech which may add meaning to the words. In Japanese a high-

pitched breathy quality is used by men for emphasis; an American may interpret this as sarcasm and become angry. Japanese often have periods of silence during a conversation with people they like, especially while eating; an American feels compelled to "keep the conversation moving", and is uncomfortable during such periods of silence because he considers the Japanese to be unfriendly for not talking more.

Perhaps the most frequently misunderstood bit of Japanese is the /ee/ or /nn/ used by men in response to a speaker's statements. An American interprets these to be sounds of agreement since slight head nods go with them, whereas his Japanese listener has only wanted to indicate that he is paying attention and politely gives a "mini-bow" of attentiveness each time he says anything.

B. Proxemics (physical nearness)

Americans have very definite concepts of territoriality, and are upset when anyone comes too close. Japanese, on the other hand, do not automatically avoid physical contact in conveyances, lines, and other public places. Americans, therefore, are uncomfortable when a Japanese sits or stands closer to him than is absolutely necessary; he is even more uncomfortable when Japanese do not make enough room for him (or others) to sit or stand when they could. Closely associated with American territoriality feelings is the American's insistence upon "first come, first served" wherever people are lined up; the Japanese rarely wait their turn unless they have been

specifically instructed to. In America fights often break out simply because someone does not wait his turn, especially when automobiles are involved. The average American driving in Japan is constantly upset by Japanese drivers (especially the taxis) that crowd in ahead or cause massive traffic jams just because Japan does not place great value upon waiting one's turn.

C. Olfaction (interpretation of odors)

This area has not been very extensively investigated anywhere except by the cosmetics manufacturers. In general, the smell of all Japanese food is unusual for the American, and it takes considerable effort for him to learn to enjoy most Japanese food. The Japanese man's choice of odors for his hair dressing and after-shave lotion often strikes the American as too feminine, though with the growing popularity of colognes for American men, the division between "masculine" odors and "feminine" fragrances has been breaking down even in America.

D. Skin sensitivity

An American in Japan, especially in the winter, is immediately aware of the relative insensitivity of the Japanese to extremes of temperature. He finds that Japanese trains are too hot, that buildings and shops are too cold, that the bath is boiling, and that the fried eggs are like ice. The American immediately assumes that the Japanese cannot notice these temperature differences (many Japanese are comfortable at temperatures which are

uncomfortable for Americans). If possible, the American will quickly adjust the temperature to suit his desires, while a Japanese will ride for many miles, visibly sweating in a hot train, without opening any windows or removing his coat. Considerably more is involved here than a simple tolerance for temperature extremes, such as the Japanese reticence to act individually for his own benefit, his fear of drawing attention to himself, etc. However, the American sees only the problems of the temperature, and concludes that the Japanese either don't care about their own comfort (or his), or are "strange" because they can put up with such temperature extremes.

E. Use of artefacts

The most striking thing about Japan to the just-arrived American is its lack of daytime color. Houses are mostly either unpainted dark wood, or dull colored plaster, and thousands of students are seen everywhere in navy blue or black uniforms. It is the unusual businessman who does not wear a dark suit and dark tie. This impression of uniform dullness comes as a surprise to the American who has seen only travel posters of kimonos, cherry blossoms, autumn leaves, and red-painted shrines. Unless the American can soon come to understand why the Japanese prefer subtle color differences, his opinion of the Japanese themselves ("they are a dull, colorless, unimaginative people") will be affected.

Much has already been written about Japanese culture and customs. If the American is not at least sympathetic toward the Japanese, he

will interpret the tea ceremony, the flower arranging, the company loyalty, the school system, and many other aspects of Japanese culture as evidence that the Japanese are a weak-willed, subservient people. The superficial uniformity within the Japanese culture conveys this impression to the individualistic Americans; therefore, this aspect of nonverbal communication is more often misunderstood than understood by Americans.

V. CONCLUSION

I have attempted to paint a fairly negative picture of the results of Americans observing Japanese nonverbal communication. Fortunately, there are many Americans who have become aware of what some, at least, of this communication means to a Japanese--but these remain only a small minority of the Americans who contact Japanese every year. My emphasis here has been on trying to explain to American and other Western readers some of the reasons we Americans misunderstand Japanese intentions. I am not suggesting that Japanese in Japan change either their body language or other culture; this would be neither possible nor clearly desirable. However, my hope is that those Americans who contact Japanese will understand why they as Americans often have an unconscious negative attitude toward the Japanese; perhaps then they will understand how patient the Japanese have been with all of us Americans who are learning to appreciate Japan and its people.

NOTES

[1]This is a revised version of the original English draft translated by Mamori Kasahara as "Gokaisareru Nihonjin no Higengo Dentatsu" in Gengo Seikatsu, No. 269 (February 1974).

[2]S. Duncan, "Nonverbal Communication," in Psychological Bulletin, Vol. 22 (1969), p. 118.

[3]Professor Helmut Morsbach of the University of Glasgow, Scotland, has written in more detail in his paper, "Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in Japan," on some of the items related to points A-E of section IV of this paper.

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